

Zeitschrift: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue suisse d'histoire = Rivista storica svizzera
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Geschichte
Band: 47 (1997)
Heft: 4: Die Schweiz und der Zweite Weltkrieg = La Suisse et la Seconde Guerre mondiale

Artikel: Pilet-Golaz and the making of Swiss foreign policy: some remarks
Autor: Wylie, Neville
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-81206>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Pilet-Golaz and the making of Swiss foreign policy: some remarks

Neville Wylie

Zusammenfassung

Nach Bonjours Darstellung folgten mehrere Studien, welche auch die innenpolitische Dimension des Aussenministers, sein Umfeld und seine Art, sich in diesem zu bewegen, sichtbar machten. Der Beitrag zeigt Pilets Verhältnis bzw. sein Nichtverhältnis zur Mehrzahl seiner Mitarbeiter und insbesondere zur Wirtschaft. Die Beziehungen zu den ausländischen Diplomaten waren offenbar gut, doch diese hatten in beiden Richtungen nur schwache Verbindungen zu ihren Regierungen. Der Hauptpunkt dieses Beitrages: Die Schweiz hatte in einer Zeit, da die Aussenwirtschaft von besonderer politischer Bedeutung war und ein Teil der schweizerischen Unternehmen grosse Kriegsgewinne erwirtschafteten, einen Aussenminister, der sich für diesen Teil der Aussenbeziehungen kaum interessierte. Die heutigen Altlasten könnten der Preis unter anderem auch für diese Vernachlässigung sein.

Résumé

A la suite de la publication du Rapport Bonjour, plusieurs études se sont intéressées au fonctionnement intérieur du ministère des Affaires étrangères. Cette contribution met en évidence les relations de Pilet-Golaz – plus exactement l'absence de relations – avec la plupart de ses collaborateurs et en particulier avec l'économie. Les contacts avec les diplomates étrangers étaient généralement bons, pourtant ceux-ci n'avaient que de faibles échanges avec leur gouvernement. C'est ainsi qu'à un moment où l'économie extérieure avait une signification politique particulière et qu'une partie des entreprises suisses réalisaient de grands profits de

* The author would like to thank Pierre Braunschweig for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

guerre, la Suisse eut un ministre des Affaires étrangères, qui ne s'intéressait qu'à peine à cette dimension des relations extérieures. Une partie des difficultés actuelles sont le coût de cette négligence.

In the recent public controversies surrounding Switzerland's wartime history, Marcel Pilet-Golaz, Swiss foreign minister from 1940 to 1944, has been noticeable by his absence. This is a curious omission, for Pilet has long been an intensely controversial figure for Swiss historians and public alike. His "defeatist" presidential radio address of 25 June 1940, audience with the Swiss fascist party the following autumn and supposed 'peace brokering' later in the war, have been the subject of much debate. If the current furore is to produce a fundamental reassessment of Switzerland's role in the war, the historical image of Pilet-Golaz is likely to require careful examination. This will be no easy task. Pilet was by nature cautious and left few clues as to his true attitudes or opinions. The strong emotions he aroused in his contemporaries have also meant that the historical record is often strongly flavoured with personal prejudice. Perhaps for these reasons, Pilet has yet to find a biographer, and there is still considerable darkness surrounding many aspects of his life and attitudes. So as to help assist in this reassessment, this essay will outline how Swiss historians have portrayed Pilet in the past, and then sketch out some aspects of Pilet's foreign policy decision making.

Pilet and the historians

The 'traditional' view of Pilet was enunciated in its most unambiguous form in Edgar Bonjour's monumental *Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität*¹. Reflecting the views of Pilet's many political opponents, Bonjour portrayed Switzerland's war as a simple struggle between adaptation or resistance, and cast Pilet in the role of leading appeaser. Pilet was the weak 'Pontius Pilate', easily swayed by the raucous criticisms emanating from Berlin and Rome, and in the end, prepared to mortgage Swiss independence and traditions in order to fit Switzerland quietly into Hitler's New Order. Bonjour did not go so far as to liken Pilet with Laval, nor did he consider Pilet a genuine 'Quisling'. But Pilet's excessive pessimism and belief in an ultimate German victory were considered important factors in weakening the morale of the federal authorities, at the very moment

1 Edgar Bonjour: *Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität. Vier Jahrhunderte eidgenössischer Aussenpolitik*, Basle, Helbing & Lichtenhahn, vols. 4–6, esp. vol. 5, chapter 17. See also Alice Meyer: *Anpassung oder Widerstand. Die Schweiz zur Zeit des deutschen Nationalsozialismus*, Frauenfeld, Huber, 1965.

when a strong lead was required. Amidst the population at large, Bonjour's magisterial report had the effect of cementing the popular view that Switzerland's difficulties in 1940 and beyond were caused, or at least aggravated, by Pilet's pusillanimity.

The opening of the federal archive to researchers quickly stimulated views of Pilet which differed from that offered by Bonjour. Initially, discussion centred around those aspects of the story which were most at odds with the popular perceptions. The proposals of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, General Guisan, for the dispatch of 'special missions' to Washington, London and most notably Berlin in the autumn of 1940 and spring of 1941 came under close scrutiny. While the motives of Guisan, hitherto considered the personification of Switzerland's will to resist, were open to a range of interpretations, Pilet's refusal to countenance any pilgrimage to Berlin obviously stood in his favour, and contradicted his image as an arch appeaser². But other areas were also considered open for reassessment. Whatever his motives in articulating a pro-German line and giving Berlin the impression that he genuinely considered an accommodation to be in Switzerland's best interests, Pilet almost certainly helped ease Swiss-German relations at a critical time. Given the state of Swiss defences, especially in the air, Pilet had just reason to consider Guisan's heroic public utterances inappropriate and even counter-productive³. Commentators in the *Suisse romande* were particularly responsive to the new research, and to the argument that Pilet had been unjustly branded a scapegoat to excuse the more ignominious chapters of Switzerland's war-time history. Though some of the works were blatantly hagiographic, and an apologetic strain exists in much of the literature, they did have the effect of popularising a more sympathetic appraisal of 'their' federal councillor⁴.

The latest retouches to Pilet's historical image have been applied by the Winterthur historian Erwin Bucher. In *Zwischen Bundesrat und General* (1991), Bucher examined Pilet's foreign policy from the perspective of his internal political situation⁵. For all the difficulties associated with this per-

2 See O. Gauye: 'Le général Guisan et la diplomatie suisse, 1940–1941', *Studien und Quellen*, 4, Berne, Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, 1978, pp. 5–63.

3 Daniel Bourgeois: 'L'image allemande de Pilet-Golaz, 1940–1944', *Studien und Quellen*, 4, 1978, pp. 68–125, and 'La Suisse et la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale. Guisan, Pilet-Golaz? Le cas des relations Germano-Suisses', *Alliance Culturelle Romande*, 23, 1977, pp. 11–16. For a critical, balanced summary of Pilet's career, see J.-C. Favez and M. Fleury: 'Marcel Pilet-Golaz 1889–1958', in Urs Altermatt (ed.): *Die Schweizer Bundesräte. Ein biographisches Lexikon*, Zurich, Artemis & Winkler, 1991 (2nd ed. 1997), pp. 366–371.

4 Alfred Bonnet: *Le grand mérite de Pilet-Golaz*, Lausanne, private publication, 1977, Georges-André Chevallaz: *Le Défi de la Neutralité. Diplomatie et défense de la Suisse 1939–1945*, Vevey, L'Aire, 1995.

5 Erwin Bucher: *Zwischen Bundesrat und General. Schweizer Politik und Armee im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, St. Gallen, Verlagsgemeinschaft, 1991, esp. pp. 575–598.

spective, the belated acknowledgement of a connection between Switzerland's *Innen-* and *Aussenpolitik*, advanced our appreciation of the circumstances within which foreign policy was allowed to develop. The array of domestic forces which Bucher sees pitted against Pilet, from virulent left wing politicians to a cabal of restive intelligence officers, may not find agreement in all quarters, but by shifting the analysis away from Switzerland's diplomatic relations, Bucher has highlighted the fact that even Switzerland's apparently tranquil domestic polity was not immune from the kind of stresses and strains which impinge on foreign policy considerations. Pilet was clearly more constrained by internal forces than his peers, and whether these forces ultimately worked in Switzerland's favour, or whether they merely exacerbated Pilet's already difficult task remain a matter of debate.

Pilet and the making of Swiss foreign policy

Any assessment of Pilet's role as foreign minister must take into account not only his own political inclinations, but also his handling of foreign policy decision making, particularly the extent to which he permitted a free exchange of ideas before taking action. Pilet had been groomed to succeed Giuseppe Motta as head of the Swiss foreign ministry, the Federal Political Department, when failing health brought Motta's twenty year tenure as foreign minister to an end in early 1940. Pilet's own outlook on foreign affairs typified that held by many Swiss, especially from the *Suisse romande*, being overwhelmingly central European in its orientation, with a healthy regard for Italian patronage, and French cultural and military hegemony. Added to this was a visceral hatred of bolshevism, which had been sharpened by many years of strained relations with socialist politicians in Switzerland.

Historians have rightly noted that Pilet's grip on foreign policy decision making was unusually strong. Much of Pilet's authority stemmed from his commanding position in the seven-man federal council. All councillors enjoyed considerable authority over their own departmental interests. During the 1920s and '30s, the traditionally collegiate nature of council's decision making was gradually overwhelmed by the waxing volume and complexity of government business. The council tended increasingly to confirm the recommendations presented by the relevant councillor with little detailed discussion⁶. For Pilet, this process was accentuated by the

6 See discussion in J. F. Paros: 'La décision suisse de satisfaire les exigences allemandes relatives aux incidents aériens de l'été 1940', *Relations internationales*, 49, 1987, 33–54.

fact that there was on the council no intellectual counter-weight to challenge his view. After the resignations of Obrecht, Minger and Baumann in 1940, Pilet's peers on the council were united in their mediocrity, barely capable of managing their own departments, far less rising to meet the dangers of an European war. There is ample evidence to show that when Pilet's interests collided with those of other councillors, particularly Kobelt (military) and Celio (Post & Railways, Pilet's former department), he had little difficulty in running rings round them and winning his case⁷. In the council sessions, Pilet's recommendations also rarely appear to have stimulated dissent, nor did he encourage any debate⁸. He was usually coy in discussing foreign policy matters and his infuriatingly evasive answers spawned many of the suspicions which shrouded his political career. Since Pilet's own personal relations with his (predominantly) German-speaking colleagues were not warm, there was seldom an opportunity to discuss matters informally. 'Man sei bei Pilet nie sicher', federal councillor von Steiger complained once, 'was er von sich aus mit fremden Diplomaten abgemacht habe'⁹. The only exception to this rule was Philipp Etter, who deputised as foreign minister for Pilet on his absences¹⁰. On the whole however, when Pilet's colleagues complained of being kept in the dark, there is more than a hint that they were relieved to be able to plead ignorance, and let Pilet shoulder the burden of steering the country's external relations.

The absence of any challenge to Pilet's hold on foreign policy in the council is of particular note, because of the marked curtailment of parliamentary business and heightened centralisation of executive authority in the hands of the federal council brought about by emergency legislation on the outbreak of war. The only forum for parliamentary oversight of federal policies during the war was the quarterly meetings of the National Council's *Vollmachtenkommissionen*¹¹. These were undoubtedly uncomfortable occasions for Pilet, and he invariably encountered a barrage of hostile

7 The same was also true with regard to General Guisan. See W. Gautschi: *Le Général Guisan*, Lausanne, Payot, 1991 (from German, 1989), pp. 423–434.

8 But see views of Bucher on the discussions surrounding the presidential address of 25 June 1940, Bucher: *Zwischen Bundesrat und General*, pp. 536–556.

9 Federal Councillor Eduard von Steiger to National Councillor Markus Feldmann, Feldmann Diary entry for 1. 3. 1943. BA. II. 3/31. folio 2199.

10 In the absence of a full biography see J. Widmer: 'Philipp Etter 1891 – 1977', in Altermatt (ed.): *Die Schweizer Bundesräte*, pp. 389–394. Etter was a member of the ICRC, but his discussions with Pilet were not restricted to humanitarian matters. Ernst Wetter later claimed to be the closest councillor to Pilet, but there is little evidence to support this view. See E. Bonjour: 'Wie lange glaubte Pilet-Golaz an den deutschen Endsieg?', in *Die Schweiz und Europa*, Vol. 7, Basle, Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1981, pp. 313–315.

11 Members of the council also occasionally met deputations from political parties, in which policy matters would be discussed.

questioning from opposition socialist or 'independent' politicians. But the *Vollmachtenkommissionen* never developed into an alternative arena for policy making. The national councillors were restricted to commenting on decisions already made and the bourgeois parties quickly closed ranks whenever opposition factions looked like causing their representatives on the federal council serious embarrassment. This was the case in the spring of 1943 when Pilet's Radical party defended him against accusations that he was trying to broker peace between Berlin and Washington¹².

If councillor and parliamentary leverage over Pilet's foreign policy appear to have been relatively limited, so too were other 'external' influences. Ironically, at a time when Swiss banking and business barons were busily profiting from the war, they were faced with the unaccustomed situation of having an independently minded federal foreign minister who was neither 'in their pocket' nor deeply interested in economic affairs. Two points arising from this are of particular significance. On the one hand, since Pilet had shunned all offers of business or banking sinecures and kept his contacts with the business community to a minimum, he was able to keep this powerful lobby at a distance and operate with a freedom of manoeuvre which few in his position would have enjoyed. According to Clifford Norton, Britain's minister in Berne, Pilet had so little respect for Swiss industrialists that he often had a 'sly laugh' with Norton whenever 'he went through the motions of defending someone whom [the Allies] had blacklisted'¹³. Swiss industrialists were no doubt well aware of Pilet's opinions and, almost unique in private and official paper collections of Swiss politicians, one finds hardly any letters from Swiss businessmen amidst Pilet's voluminous correspondence.

On the other hand, Pilet's disinterest in commercial matters tended to make him undervalue economic considerations in his foreign policy. Trade quotas and financial credits were, for Pilet, concessions which could be dispensed, freely if necessary, to assist Switzerland's passage through the war¹⁴. He therefore left commercial policy to the economic authorities, and remained only partially informed through reports from Robert Kohli, the Federal Political Department official in charge of economic and financial affairs. Consequently, for most of the war, while Swiss trade and finance

12 For this episode see, Bucher: *Zwischen Bundesrat und General*, pp. 79–220.

13 Confidential memo. by Norton in Norton to Howard (FO) 24. 2. 1945. PRO. FO371/49687 Z2585. For the listing of Sulzer see Oswald Inglin: *Der stille Krieg. Der Wirtschaftskrieg zwischen Grossbritannien und der Schweiz im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Zurich, Neue Zürcher Zeitung Verlag, 1991, pp. 172–181, and Neville Wylie: *Britain and the Swiss, 1939–1945*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

14 See his comments on 21 June 1940 to the federal financial delegation in *Documents Diplomatiques Suisses*, Vol. 13, Berne, Benteli, 1991, No. 314/1.

policy matched the interests of the central bank, businesses and banking, it lacked a strong political component. After the initial concessions granted to the Axis after the collapse of France, overt political considerations came to the fore rarely, most notably in the autumn of 1943 and during negotiations with the Allied powers in early 1945. On the whole, in the absence of a strong political lead from Pilet's department, the smooth swinging doors between business, banking, and politics revolved quietly, enabling commercial interests groups to dominate federal trade and financial policy¹⁵.

Measuring the influence exercised by other elements in Switzerland's complex social mosaic on Pilet is even harder to assess, especially since so little research on Switzerland's 'hidden wiring' has been carried out since Daniel Bourgeois' seminal article twenty years ago¹⁶. Pilet was fully conscious of the arguments of those wishing to appease Germany and Italy. As federal president, he received the famous 'petition' of 15 November 1940 signed by leading figures, calling for the introduction of arbitrary and undemocratic measures to defend Swiss independence. Although Pilet was in contact with former federal councillor Jean-Marie Musy, who was active in courting German personalities during the early war years, Pilet was certainly not Musy's 'parrot', as Musy boasted¹⁷. Gonzague de Reynold, one of the most articulate Swiss with authoritarian inclinations, also sent Pilet a number of reports during 1940, encouraging him to ignore popular pro-British sentiments¹⁸. More influential perhaps was Philipp Etter, councillor for the interior department, and the one councillor with unambiguous authoritarian leanings. Again however, Etter's exact influence over Pilet is unclear. If there are doubts over specific relationships, it is nonetheless clear that Pilet was not a natural confederate for these groups, even when France's collapse had so profoundly shaken his confidence and political beliefs. He was not counted amongst Switzerland's patrician society, to whom, like their cousins elsewhere in Europe, the call 'better Hitler than Blum (or Stalin)' found such a strong resonance before and during the fascist ascendancy. For every example of Pilet bowing to German pressure or flirting with authoritarian views, can be found others,

15 The numerous self-congratulatory histories of Switzerland's leading business do little to illuminate their role in Swiss foreign affairs. One of the primary challenges facing analysts today is to examine the link between Swiss government, industries and banks in the making of federal trade policy, especially the role of business lobby groups and the chamber of commerce (Vorort), whose chairman, Heinrich Homberger, was one of the primary architects of Swiss trade policy during the war.

16 Daniel Bourgeois: 'Milieux d'affaires et politique étrangère suisse à l'époque des fascismes', *Relations internationales*, 1, 1974, pp. 181–207.

17 According to information reaching the US legation in Berne. UK embassy, Washington, to Foreign Office, 2. 12. 1941. PRO. FO371/26344 C13022.

18 See correspondence in BA. E2001 (D) 2/29, and *inter alia* A. Mattioli: *Zwischen Demokratie und Totalitärer Diktatur*, Zurich, Orell Füssli, 1994, pp. 256–291.

demonstrating his determination to maintain his, and Switzerland's freedom of action.

Within the Federal Political Department (FPD), Pilet's intellectual isolation continued. Policy decisions were ruthlessly centralised under his personal control. The only official whose advice Pilet consistently valued and relied upon was the head of the division for political affairs, Pierre Bonna. Born into a Genevan banking family, Bonna had spent almost his entire career in Berne as a functionary of the FPD. Though knowledgeable and intelligent, the lack of a foreign experience meant that his world view revolved almost exclusively around the Federal palace. Added to this intensely Swiss-centric outlook, was a naturally cautious, almost unimaginative attitude towards the art of diplomacy which perfectly embodied Talleyrand's dictum, 'above all, no zeal!' In Bonna therefore, Pilet had an official whose innate prudence, political and cultural references mirrored his own, and whose temperament inclined him towards compromise; hardly the person to contest Pilet's handling of foreign policy. Yet it was with Bonna that Pilet would meet to decide foreign policy matters, whether they concerned Bonna's division or not, as in the case of Berne's protecting power duties. Other senior officials invariably had to reach Pilet through Bonna, or submit written memoranda for Pilet's attention. Though undoubtedly exaggerating, the head of the FPD's press section claimed in October 1942 to have met with Pilet once the entire year, and Bonna only twice¹⁹. Pilet countenanced no independent initiatives from his officials. No press announcements about Berne's protecting power activities could be released without Pilet's prior consent. One of the reasons behind the FPD's reputation for being so uncommunicative lay in the fact that since most of the officials did not have access to Pilet, far less were privy to his ideas, they were almost incapable of answering questions on foreign policy matters²⁰.

Curiously for someone whose experience of foreigners was so restricted, foreign diplomats played a vital part in Pilet's diplomacy. Having considered a problem, requested 'Notizen' from his staff, and perhaps discussed the matter with Bonna or other senior officials, Pilet's next step was to take the matter up with the relevant diplomat in Berne. Here was the crux of Pilet's diplomatic technique – confidential, often secret, but above all personal, negotiations with foreign diplomats. In fact to some extent, Pilet's desire to play all the cards himself did not do his country a disservice. Pilet's penchant for 'secret diplomacy' suited the type of work Berne

19 Diary of Markus Feldmann (then National Councillor), 16.10.1942. BA. JI. 3 Vol. 30 folio. 1959. Papers consulted with kind permission of Dr. Hans Feldmann.

20 See Pilet's remarks to federal councillor Kobelt about his staff cited in P. Braunschweig: *Geheimer Draht nach Berlin*, Zurich, Neue Zürcher Zeitung Verlag, 1989, p. 450, note 185.

was called upon to fulfil in representing the interests of one belligerent in the territory of another, as their protecting power. Historians have generally been slow in recognising the importance of this aspect of the FPD's wartime work. Pilet's negotiations with foreign diplomats in Berne were generally commendable. While in public Pilet came across as contemptuous, affected and autocratic, in private discussions he was much more appealing²¹. To foreigners, bored by Berne's sombre social circuit, Pilet's sociability and lively mind were a welcome breath of fresh air. Even as late as November 1944, an American official found Pilet 'an admirable and entertaining conversationalist [who] was quite frank in expressing his views on many subjects'²². Pilet rightly prided his ability to cultivate friendships with the senior belligerent diplomats. He could speak his mind freely with the German minister, Otto Köcher, who was especially grateful for Pilet's part in hushing up news of a car accident in July 1940 in which Köcher had run over and killed a Swiss citizen²³. More surprisingly, Pilet also maintained excellent relations with the Anglo-Saxon diplomats, of whose world and cultural back-ground he knew so little. With Leland Harrison, the US minister, Pilet enjoyed good relations²⁴. He developed a warm, lasting friendship with the British minister, David Kelly, and Kelly's successor, Clifford Norton, though not uncritical of Pilet, clearly admired him. On Pilet's retirement Norton remarked, 'It is a fitting, if ironic, commentary that the outspoken and general dislike felt for him by his countrymen should find so little echo, at any rate in official circles, among the principal European belligerents, against whose exigencies it was his daily task to defend the material and political interests of his country'²⁵.

For all the points Pilet scored with foreign diplomats, there were however significant problems inherent to his private style of diplomacy. Although Pilet's reliance on the diplomatic missions in Berne suited the confidential nature of much of Switzerland's protecting power activities, it gave Pilet precious little insight into the 'minds' of the major belligerent governments. Köcher's ability to talk for Berlin was always problematic

21 The diary of National Councillor Markus Feldmann provides an excellent illustration of how Pilet was able to soften the views of one of his most ardent critics after a private meeting between the two men in April 1943. BA. JI. 3 Vol. 31 folios. 2258–65 for April 1943.

22 N. Lankford (ed.): *OSS against the Reich. The World War II Diaries of Col. David K. E. Bruce*, Kent, Ohio, Kent State University Press, 1991, p. 193.

23 BA. JI. 17. 1990/98/174. FPD Note 'Streng Vertraulich', 15. 7. 1940, and Bourgeois: 'L'image allemande de Pilet-Golaz', p. 110.

24 See forthcoming PhD thesis by Monika Bachmann: 'Leland Harrison and Swiss-American relations during the Second World War', London School of Economics, University of London.

25 Norton to Eden, 28. 12. 1944. PRO. FO371/49687 Z519. On Pilet's relations with Britain's ministers see Neville Wylie: 'Marcel Pilet-Golaz, David Kelly and Anglo-Swiss relations in 1940', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 8/1, 1997, 49–79, and 'Zwischen Bundesrat und Grossbritannien. Pilet-Golaz and his domestic opponents. The British connection', forthcoming.

given the chaotic nature of Nazi decision making, and it diminished noticeably as the standing of the Reich's foreign minister Joachim Ribbentrop waned. Pilet's relations with von Bibra, the party official and main power broker in the German legation, were never good. The French ambassador, de la Baume, lacked influence amongst the ruling clique in Vichy, while David Kelly, an 'old-school' diplomat who was starved of information from London, was undoubtedly out of touch with 'Churchillian' Britain after May 1940. Moreover, Kelly's freedom to formulate British policy towards Switzerland before mid-1941 was soon contested by competing government departments in London, and even by maverick commercial officials in his own legation. The same was true with Leland Harrison, who was bewildered by the demise of the State Department's influence over US foreign policy and faced grave difficulties with some of his staff who rejected his excessive neutralism. In short, when Pilet relied on foreign heads of missions as prisms to survey the world beyond Switzerland's frontiers, he received a distorted picture. Pilet completely exaggerated their importance within the diplomatic matrix; the weight he placed on his relations with foreign diplomats was not shared by the governments which they represented.

A further problem with Pilet's preference for personal action was that it ignored the resources provided by Switzerland's own diplomatic service. Admittedly, some sensitive protecting power correspondence was specifically channelled by the belligerents through Pilet alone, but Pilet's marginalisation of Swiss diplomats went beyond merely a question of tactics. By the end of the war, there were few Swiss diplomats who had not felt themselves slighted by Pilet, either for being kept waiting for days before being granted an audience, or having the impression that their dispatches were left unread²⁶. Walter Thurnheer in London was so much left in the dark over official policy that he invariably had to call on the Foreign Office to find out what Pilet had just arranged in Berne. Being a diplomat of a small neutral was a rough job at the best of times; Pilet made it doubly difficult. Personal animosities may well have influenced Pilet's behaviour; particularly so with the prickly Walter Stucki in Vichy, and the banker Vieli, whose backers in Berne, including Etter, may have secured him his position as minister in Rome against Pilet's wishes. There were also diplomats, such as Frölicher in Berlin, who Pilet felt had 'gone native' and whose judgements were therefore considered unreliable²⁷.

26 See remark by William Rappard in the *Vollmachtenkommission* debate, 16. 9. 1942. BA E2809/1.

27 For Frölicher and Swiss representation abroad see, G. Kreis: 'General Guisan, Minister Frölicher und die Mission Burckhardt 1940', *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Geschichte*, 19, 1977, pp. 99–121.

It was however Pilet's jealousy and desire to keep undisputed control of Swiss foreign policy which lies at the heart of his treatment of Swiss diplomats. His relations with Thurnheer bare out this point. Thurnheer's health problems frequently caused him to be absent from his desk for long periods from early 1942. This, and his meek demeanour had encouraged certain sections of the press to call for his replacement. Despite the problems of Thurnheer's position in London, Pilet steadfastly refused to find a substitute until May 1944, by which time the London post had been vacant for six months. Pilet's attitude towards Thurnheer was not due to any lingering sense of duty or affection. For Pilet, Thurnheer possessed one inestimable advantage. As a career diplomat Thurnheer lacked powerful sponsors in Berne, which meant that he could be ignored with impunity²⁸. Moreover, given the dearth of qualified candidates, Thurnheer's obvious replacement for most of the war would have been Henri Vallotton. President of the National Council in 1939, president of the Vollmachtenkommission for foreign affairs until June 1940, a Vaudois Radical (like Pilet), and one of the leading French-speaking politicians, Vallotton was a potential substitute for Pilet, should his adversaries succeed in ousting him from the council. Pilet may have had good reason to wish Vallotton out of Berne, but he certainly did not want to see him in an important diplomatic post. Rio de Janeiro, the post eventually secured for Vallotton in September 1943 was much more to Pilet's liking!²⁹ In the event, neither Vallotton nor Thurnheer gave Pilet much trouble. Thurnheer suffered his ignominious situation in stoic silence, and Vallotton gradually gave up his ambition to occupy the *Suisse romande* seat on the council, and is best remembered today for providing a 'Zeitungszimmer' (cafeteria!) for the federal palace³⁰. But such improvements in Pilet's political position were a heavy price to pay for Switzerland's inadequate representation in one of the major belligerent capitals. Pilet may have been bequeathed a Mini-sized diplomatic service, but under his direction it gave the performance of a Trabant.

Pilet's attitude towards the Anglo-Saxon world both illustrates the problems associated with his style of decision-making, and represents one of the principle areas where these failings were at their most acute. Pilet never understood the Anglo-Saxon world. His view of Britain was typically Gallic: of the 'perfidious Albion' variety, rather than the magnanimous Britannia, ruling the waves for the common good. As for the 'land of

28 Similar attitudes may in some small part lie behind Pilet's refusal to recall Frölicher from Berlin.

29 Vallotton had been offered the London post in 1939, but had declined it, probably in order to further his political career in Berne. BA. E1004.1 1 Minutes of the Federal Council, 14. 7. 1939. Bucher: *Zwischen Bundesrat und General*, p. 428, 529.

30 Thurnheer mentioned his difficulties to William Rappard, and other people during his occasional visits to Berne, but his professionalism prevented him from making his criticisms too vocal.

the free', this was populated by uncouth cowboys, as unrefined in their manners as they were in the intricacies of diplomacy. Pilet made some paltry attempts to make up for the gaps in his knowledge by drawing on the advice of Switzerland's pre-war minister in London in early 1940. But once every Francophone's suspicion of British had been confirmed at Dunkirk, Oran and Dakar, Pilet seems to have given up expecting anything from London. He remained wedded to this mind-set until late 1943, paying little attention to Thurnheer in London (who was, in his opinion, "völlig angliisiert") and rejecting all suggestions to employ an Anglo-Saxon specialist on his staff³¹. The one FPD official capable of fulfilling this function, former councillor in London, Clemente Rezzonico, was shunted off as head of the press division. Pilet only drew on his talents in the spring of 1944 when, bewildered by the sudden aggressive tone in Allied attitudes towards Switzerland, Pilet belatedly dispatched him on a fact finding mission to London.

As a result Pilet remained out of touch with the changing currents of opinion in the Allied capitals and blind to the implications of their irresistible military successes. When confronted with evidence of Switzerland's poor standing, Pilet invariably discounted it, blithely assuming that gratitude for his humanitarian work, and his good relations with the Allied diplomats would be sufficient to defend Switzerland's vital interests. As a last resort, after reading Rezzonico's mission report in early 1944, he grudgingly agreed to augment the London legation's entertainment allowance! Quite how long Pilet believed in a German victory is a matter of conjecture, but the conviction that neither Britain nor America could solve Europe's problems, meant that a compromise peace always appeared to be the war's most likely outcome. Keeping on good relations with Nazi Germany was therefore not simply a requirement of Swiss neutrality, but was based on the assumption that Berne would have to deal with Berlin's criminal regime for some time to come.

Switzerland's relations with the west were also significantly influenced by Pilet's disregard for commercial matters. Since his involvement in Swiss trade policy was as negligible as his interest in it, Berne's commercial relations with the west were allowed to develop in a political vacuum. Consequently, as economic and financial matters began impinging on Allied relations with Switzerland from 1942, the Swiss deluded themselves that all was well, and continued to view Swiss-Allied economic relations in terms of their impact on Switzerland, rather than *visa versa*. Ig-

31 Willam Rappard to Federal Councillor Walter Stampfli 1. 6. 1942. BA. JI 149/1977/135 Vol. 118, and Daniel Bourgeois: 'William Rappard et la politique extérieure suisse à l'époque des fascismes, 1933-1945', *Studien und Quellen*, 15, 1989, pp. 7-76.

norant of the exact nature of Switzerland's commercial commitments with Germany, Pilet was taken by surprise when the Allies embarked on an aggressive campaign against Swiss metallurgical firms in the autumn of 1943, and 'black-listed' the firm of Hans Sulzer, one of Switzerland's pre-eminent business/political figures. Stirred into action, Pilet injected some political sense into the debate, forcing the council to resist the demands of the metallurgical industry, and reach a settlement with the Allies. However, Swiss commercial and financial affairs with the west continued to be largely divorced from Pilet's handling of Switzerland's political relations over the following year, and remained so with the exception of a brief interlude in early 1945 during the so-called Currie negotiations.

The historical jury is still out on Pilet. This remote, aloof figure, continues to intrigue, beguile and baffle historians. What is beyond doubt however, is that the conduct of Swiss foreign policy from 1940 to 1944 was in many critical respects indelibly stamped with Pilet's character. Isolated from his federal colleagues, fellow politicians, interest groups and even departmental officials, Pilet had a remarkably free hand in defining foreign policy. More research is required on Pilet's political attitudes after the shattering experience of the fall of France, especially the allure of authoritarian Pétainist political solutions in the second half of 1940. However, in jealously 'cocooning' himself and his work from outside influences, Pilet allowed Swiss foreign policy to develop in a sterile intellectual environment. Debate was too often reduced to memoranda, with inadequate discussion on policy issues, and insufficient opportunities for officials to present opinions which challenged Pilet's view of Switzerland's place in Europe or the course of the war. Likewise, little was done to question Pilet's definition of Switzerland's political interests, a definition which failed to give sufficient weight to economic and financial considerations. The political implications of Switzerland's commercial policies were therefore overlooked by the very department whose job it was to secure Switzerland's interests abroad. As a result Switzerland's banking and business interests groups enjoyed unfettered influence and were permitted to mortgage federal trade policy and the country's economic independence to the Axis powers. Switzerland may well still be paying the price for Pilet's oversight today.